

Development of Art and Religion Through Compromise: Medieval Christian Art and Chinese Religious Art

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Abstract: The significance of this paper lies in the analysis of medieval religious art in China and Europe, which sheds light on how the intersection of religion and art reflects cultural and societal values. To understand the delicate balance between artistic expression and religious influence, this study delves into the development and evolution of religious art during the medieval period. The comprehensive comparative analysis is conducted using an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural approach that integrates perspectives from art history, history, religious studies, and aesthetics. The findings reveal that while initially, art in both regions was predominantly influenced by religious ideals, it gradually asserted its independence and shifted from a God-centered to a human-centered approach. The results of this study imply that despite its oppressive origins, religious art managed to harness religion as a catalyst for innovation and enrichment, showcasing the resilience and adaptive capacities of art.

Keywords: Religious Art, Medieval Studies, Comparative Studies, Artistic Expression

1. Introduction

The medieval period is a crucial and extensive era in human history, playing a significant role in the study of religious and art history. It spans from the late 5th century to the mid-15th century, commencing with the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 AD and concluding with the demise of the Eastern Roman Empire in 1453 AD [1]. In Chinese history, this period corresponds to the dynasties from the Southern Dynasties (420-589 AD) to the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 AD) [2]. Within this historical context, the development of medieval Chinese and Western religious art, influenced by distinct social environments, showcases the cultural underpinnings and aesthetic preferences of two contrasting societies. It encapsulates shared thought processes amidst diverse national sentiments, thus holding profound humanistic significance and posing valuable avenues for comparative analysis.

Considerable research has already been conducted on medieval Christian art and Chinese religious art, yielding fruitful outcomes. J. Hall, for instance, explores artistic themes in the East and West while explicating different cultural symbols [3]. Similarly, S. Fei and G. Ming investigate how religious figures in Chinese and Western paintings manifest divinity and secular human nature through artistic methods and expressive forms [4]. However, these works have certain limitations primarily restricted to the domain of art history, focusing predominantly on the subject matter, color schemes, and aesthetic implications of Christian art and Chinese religious art. Nevertheless, when

placed within the broader historical frameworks of China and the West, the developmental trajectory of religious art during this epoch demonstrates intriguing similarities and provokes further introspection.

Consequently, this study endeavors to undertake a comparative analysis of medieval Christian art and Chinese religious art, which emerged in culturally equal yet relatively insular regions. Adopting an interdisciplinary, cross-disciplinary, and cross-cultural approach, this study incorporates perspectives from art history, history, religious studies, and aesthetics. By examining how art in both China and Europe during the medieval era engaged in compromise with religious ideals, fostering mutual development and gradually emancipating itself from strict religious confines, this study aims to comprehend the intricate relationship between religion and art and the inherent humanistic attributes. It embodies development through compromise.

2. Art Essentially Oppressed by Religion

The word "art" has undergone a radical change, and the works of art that are appreciated in the modern sense have been created purposefully throughout history. Art and religion should have been separate and equal divisions with different purposes, but in the particular medieval world, when all art was transformed into religious art with the sole purpose of serving religion, art was essentially oppressed by religion and had to compromise with it.

2.1. Individual Thoughts and Emotions Controlled by Religion

Psychology believes that religious cognition is manifested in two processes: the first is the process of religious information intake and storage; the second is based on the first process, in a specific situation, the self-specific feelings, thinking, imagination, and other psychological activities, which are manifested externally in the experience of the presence of God's sensibility and immediacy [5]. In the Middle Ages, when the channels of information intake were not smooth, most of the believers were still illiterate and passive recipients of the teachings.

When the right of communication with God and the right of interpret of doctrines were almost monopolized by the Church, controlling the first cognitive process meant controlling the process of religious experience and its deposition of the subject of faith in the second process. This control was realized by controlling the emotional experience of the believers. As a result, a blind and highly inflammable fanaticism pervaded the whole Christian world, and the believers could only passively accept the collective manipulation of their emotions by God's divinity and accept being provided with the only supreme values, feeling something to hold on to, something to pursue, and feeling recognized in the process of faith [5].

Religion also served as a means for ancient Chinese autocratic rulers to control the minds of their subjects and solidify their authoritarian rule. The prevalent religions in ancient China all advocated for promoting goodness and enduring hardships, with Buddhism particularly emphasizing concepts such as reincarnation and karmic retribution, urging believers to renounce desires and passively accept their fate. Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty in the Southern Dynasty was a devout Buddhist. He declared Buddhism as the state religion and even temporarily became a monk on three occasions [6]. During this period, numerous Buddhist temples were built, and the number of monks and nuns increased significantly, resulting in the dominance of Buddhist ideology over the thoughts of the populace.

Therefore, in both medieval China and the West, the use of religion for ideological control and to consolidate political power created a social environment where individuals lacked platforms for expressing their personal emotions and asserting their own identities.

2.2. Repression in Medieval Christian Art

Individual rationality in art was replaced by only divinity and could not play a dominant role in the Middle Ages. Hegel's "beauty is the sensual manifestation of reason" emphasized that art should not only be a sensual expression but also a rational core [7]. Religion guided the direction of their behavior and deeply influenced the consequences of their behavior, and the emotion of the believers was already a kind of public emotion [8].

Originally, each person had a different understanding of the world and individuality due to different emotional experiences and rational spirits, so artists saw the world differently and created a variety of unique works, which was the process of exploring the world with rationality from an individual's point of view, while in the Middle Ages, there could only be one way of looking at the world, i.e., the subject passively accepting the commonalities of the object world, which not only suppressed the glory of rationality but also completely wiped out individuality, making it impossible for them to be rational [8]. This not only suppressed the light of reason but also completely wiped out individuality and fundamentally suppressed artistic creativity.

At the end of the 6th century A.D., Pope Gregory, the Grand Pontiff of the Latin Church in the western part of the Roman Empire, said, "What an article can do for a literate person, a painting can do for an illiterate person." [9] It was evidently a greatly restricted art, and if it was to serve Gregory's purpose, the story had to be told as briefly as possible, and whatever was likely to distract attention from this divine main theme should be omitted. They regarded painting as a mere means of propaganda for the dissemination of doctrine, and therefore the art developed for the purpose certainly had nothing to do with beauty or skill, much less with the expression of personal feeling.

2.3. Reverence and Compromise in Medieval Chinese Buddhist Art

A similar situation can be seen in China, where the Buddhist art that flourished during this period was based on Buddhist classics and represented the world of religious fantasy. Cave art, especially the murals of the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang, became an unrivaled representative of Buddhist culture. No matter the spiritual connotation of the works or the personal beliefs of the painters, they are all closely attached to the Buddhist ideology.

Through the works, one can clearly recognize the goal of the painters to persuade the living beings and to express their piety, and the process of painting is at the same time the process of completing their own religious cultivation, and the works represented by these murals in the temples are undoubtedly religious art [10]. These works are all done by anonymous craftsmen, and under the constraints of religious commandments and taboos, they form a set of strict rituals and programs, which are the basic characteristics of religious art [10].

Taking the drawing of Tibetan Buddhist thangka as an example, religious art must retain the complete norms, and cannot add the expression of personal feelings, such as using a certain number of barley grains as a unit of measurement, the way to paint the Buddha's and Bodhisattva's eyebrows, and everything must not be altered at will during the creation [11]. In religious paintings, the portrayal of the "Venerable" (*zun zhe* 尊者) is not ego in the sense [12]. Folk painters or monk painters, who gained physical and spiritual food by painting gods and goddesses, could only be recognized as representing the will of the gods and goddesses and expressing the extraordinary world if they followed the rules of religious ritualization and dogmatization.

In this period, only a few painters with exceptional artistic talent and a desire for self-expression dared to add to the images of the insignificant attendants and supporters some of the content they had experienced in secular life. The artist, who has lost his artistic ego, goes into hiding and attributes his creations to the gods and goddesses. Such a way of painting, compromising with religion and

naturally lacking in inspiration and individuality, is also a major characteristic of Chinese religious art of this period.

3. Religion Objectively Promoting the Development of Art

Although in the early stages of the development of religious art in the Middle Ages, art was transformed by religion into a tool primarily used for evangelism, it made concessions to religion in constructing a subordinate social relationship. Religion, in turn, provided indispensable favorable conditions for the development of art during the medieval period, which was hindered by relatively closed geographical regions and a lack of cultural exchange.

3.1. New Styles and Themes for Art Provided by Religion

Religion provided new styles and forms, new themes and contents. Christian theology, which originated from Judaism, greatly stimulated the imagination of the Western world as an exotic culture in the process of fighting and integrating with the native cultures of the Western world, and medieval art created a wide range of themes and contents that are beyond the expectation of modern people [13]. In this complex land, each region had its own different situation, different customs and culture as well as different conditions for artistic creation, and different imagination and creativity may have gushed out in different places.

On the other hand, due to the change in the purpose of art, the Middle Ages placed completely different demands on the artist than did the ancient Greek period, and as a result, the forms of artistic style changed significantly. In the construction of churches alone, there were Byzantine, Romanesque, Gothic and other styles, and different artistic styles could be created in different regions with different interpretations of the teachings [14]. Despite the perception of medieval art as rigid and lifeless, it is crucial to recognize that it represents a late period in art history. Notably, medieval folk art boasts a legacy within Western art history due to its richness and magnificence, which flourished even during the dark era of church corruption and expanding power [15].

The development of art in medieval China also utilized religion for enrichment and development. From the reign of Emperor Ming of the Han Dynasty to the early Tang Dynasty, Chinese people went from being amazed and appreciating Indian Buddhist art, to beginning to imitate it, and eventually to digesting and absorbing it, thus forming the basis of a uniquely Chinese style of Buddhist painting. The influence of Indian Buddhism and its art on Chinese painting mainly manifested in the subject matter and techniques (such as form, coloring, and brushwork), but it remained in a shallow surface [6]. What is more historically and culturally significant is the deeper influence of Buddhism on the art of Chinese painting, that is, the influence on the artistic thinking of Chinese painting, artistic interests, artistic concepts and so on.

However, both the deep and shallow influences were mainly confined to the creation of Buddhist art before the Sui and Tang dynasties. During the Song and Yuan dynasties, Taoist art in the boom period drew extensively from Taoist stories and legends of the immortals (*xian ren* 仙人), and developed such art forms as landscape painting and bird and flower painting, taking advantage of Taoism's idea of "tao obeys zi ran," (*dao fa zi ran* 道法自然) which emphasizes harmony with nature [12].

3.2. Religious Utilization of Art for Propaganda Purposes

Religions have been known to utilize art as a means of preaching, aiming to sway the emotions and beliefs of their followers and create a collective sentiment. Taine, in his *Philosophy of Art*, argues that human tendencies such as misanthropy, susceptibility to illusions, frequent despair, and a longing for solace naturally lead individuals to embrace religious beliefs that present the world as a realm of

suffering, life as a test, communion with God as the ultimate bliss, and devotion to God as their foremost duty [16]. The contrasting ideas of eternal terror and boundless hope, of a blazing inferno and a heavenly paradise, serve as nourishment for the troubled or apprehensive mind [17]. Consequently, Christianity, with its rejection of statues but reliance on art, governs the hearts of its adherents, inspires artistic expression, harnesses the talents of artists, and promotes the development of art.

During the early period in China, religious art played a crucial role in promoting religious beliefs and achieving certain political objectives, which is similar to the purpose of religious art before the Western Renaissance. Feudal rulers utilized religious artwork to spread their religious doctrines, instill fear in people's hearts, regulate and promote social norms, and maintain social order. Therefore, the primary function of early religious artwork was propaganda and education. One can observe paintings depicting the terrifying scenes of the underworld or demonic judges, aiming to strike fear and serve as a warning. This reflects the role of religion in regulating social order.

At the same time, the use of religion allowed Chinese art to spread widely and develop rapidly during this period. Religious art in China primarily originated from Buddhism. Although Taoism was the indigenous religion, Buddhism provided a more effective means to alleviate class contradictions in the prevailing historical context and received strong promotion from rulers, gaining widespread acceptance among the populace. Additionally, the dominance of Confucian culture in China also influenced the creation of religious artwork. Confucianism emphasizes the importance of "rites" (*li*禮) in social norms, which refers to elaborate rituals serving as external manifestations of significant customs, social rules, religious beliefs, political and economic life, or moral requirements [12]. Religious art can more concretely embody the content of these rituals and highlight their significance, thus achieving powerful propaganda effects.

4. Development Trend: Shifting from God-Centric to Human-Centric Approaches

Objectively, within the transformative journey of art's purpose, it found opportunities for independent development amidst the transitional periods and cease making concessions to religion. Although art was closely intertwined with religion during the Middle Ages, it gradually emancipated itself from its original ties to nature and religion. As Gombrich explains, it was precisely the freedom that medieval artists gained from imitating nature that enabled them to convey supernatural ideas [18].

4.1. The Humanistic Tendency in Christian Art during the Late Middle Ages

Christian art in Europe in the Middle Ages under the rule of the unity of church and state, covering all forms and contents of art in Europe. During this period, Byzantine art is of the most representative. Byzantine religious art revolves around the themes of emperor worship and theological propaganda, and as such, it can be considered an official art form that embodies spiritual rule. Consequently, it inevitably exerts some level of influence over people's minds, thereby leading to a formulaic and conceptualized style of art. This tendency also represents the literary style of Western and Southern Europe under the rule of the Holy See. The stereotyped and dogmatic artistic paradigm limited and inhibited human thinking, which eventually led to the Renaissance movement [19].

From the works of early Renaissance painters and sculptors, Cimabue and Giotto, the impact of the stereotyping of Byzantine art can already be found, and the works already have a secular flavor [20]. Even in the works of the extremely pious monk painter Angelico, the conceptual teachings of Christianity were poeticized, and the painter's self-creative spirit was greatly enhanced. By the time the "Three Masters" of the Renaissance - Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Raphael - rose to prominence, the face of religious painting in Europe had undergone a radical change [21]. Almost all

the religious works created by them represented the human figure, human behavior and the world of the human mind.

In fact, it was also during this period that European art broke free from the shackles of religious concepts and entered the stage of self-consciousness dominating artistic creation. Although religious content was still an important subject, the portrayal of religious figures was entirely based on real life, freeing the works from the influence of modeling, injecting humanistic tendencies, and generating a strong sense of the times, thus opening up a diversified development of Western art.

4.2. Literati Painting: A Novel Interpretation of Chinese Religious Aesthetics

Wang Wei, Su Shi, Dong Qichang, and other influential traditional cultures sparked the interest of Chinese painters in religion and promoted the formation of the concept of literati painting. In particular, the fusion of the meaning of "Zen" and the "brush and ink" (*bi mo* 筆墨) of Chinese painting produced a philosophical meaning of enlightenment in the aesthetic consciousness [10]. As a result, the subjective understanding of "enlightenment" (*wu* 悟) in Buddhism became an important part of the aesthetics of Chinese painting. The representative of this thought that influenced the theory of Chinese painting was Dong Qichang's derivation of the Zen sect for the theory of landscape painting, i.e., the "North and South Sects"[6]. Since then, Chinese landscape painters have been proud of the Zen flavor in their paintings, while figure painters have taken the figures of Buddhism and Taoism as their traditional subjects, such as Guanyin's appearance, Lohan's tiger, and the monk, and so on, which have not declined to this day, while their intention of promoting Buddhism and persuading people to convert has gradually disappeared, embodying the humanistic and artistic aspects of religion.

It is worth noting that from the perspective of traditional Chinese aesthetics looking at religious paintings, this kind of "out of the world" (*chu shi* 出世) attitude to express the illusory realm of the works are included in the "common" (*su* 俗) aesthetic category [6]. Because it is an inherited, programmed and "artisanal" (*jiang qi* 匠氣) form of art. Once the religious paintings received the "elegant" (*ya* 雅) component from the literati painters, they lost their inherent religious significance and instead utilized the special revelation of religious philosophy on the human mind to open up a new aesthetic breadth and depth, thus deepening the artistic context of Chinese literati paintings.

4.3. The Development and Autonomy Exploration of Medieval Religious Art

By the end of the Middle Ages, the two distinct cultural paradigms of China and the West showed the same development process: from art serving religion to religion serving art, the development of religious art in the process of compromise embodied the development trend from God-centered to human-centered.

Art itself should maintain its independence. Hegel's "Aesthetics" suggests that religion employs art to "provide solace and illustrate religious truths through imagery for the sake of imagination." [7] He further acknowledges that "in this case, art is indeed serving a purpose distinct from its own domain." However, artistic self-consciousness is an ongoing developmental process. The innate inclination of art towards autonomous growth and self-awareness remains constant.

Chinese painting, in getting rid of the concept of religion, has developed the aesthetic concept of "elegance and vulgarity", while Christian art has developed the aesthetic concept of humanism. These two aesthetic ideas, which have nothing in common on the surface, have an inner identity - a humanistic view of art as a theme. It is only that Christian art has a road of development that directly takes the image and behavior of human beings as the object of expression. In contrast, Chinese painting has taken the road of indirect expression that relies on the subjective thinking of human being and objective objects, such as landscapes, flowers and birds, and so on.

5. Conclusion

This paper provides a comparative analysis of medieval religious art in China and Europe, examining the interplay between religion and art. The study's significance lies in its exploration of how art initially served religious propaganda but gradually emancipated itself, indicating a shift from God-centered to human-centered approaches.

Using an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural approach, combining perspectives from art history, history, religious studies, and aesthetics, this study examined the evolution of medieval religious art in two regions of relative equality. The findings underscore the resilience and adaptive capacities of art, particularly its ability to utilize restrictive frameworks for innovation and subsequently break free from them. This understanding offers valuable insights into key questions concerning the dynamic relationship between religion and art, contributing to a deeper appreciation of their profound humanistic significance.

Despite its comprehensive analysis, limitations persist in this study. The complexity and vast expanse of medieval religious art in both China and Europe necessitate more nuanced and localized studies that delve into specific regional variations and influences. Therefore, future research could focus on these regional variances within the broader framework of religious art, thus further enriching our understanding of the intricate and evolving relationship between religion and art. Additionally, an exploration of the societal values and cultural underpinnings reflected in the transition towards human-centric approaches would provide valuable insights into the socio-cultural dynamics of the respective societies.

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